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CREMATION AND CHRISTIANITY.

It is natural that the Christian church should take a deep interest in the question as to the disposal of the dead, which is becoming prominent among the topics of public discussion. In America, but few burials occur at which some representative of the Christian religion does not officiate. Whatever may have been the attitude of the departed soul toward Christianity, or however the survivors may regard the religion of Jesus Christ, when the soul has left the body the final disposition of the empty house is generally attended, superintended, by a professed minister of Christ. Therefore, so firmly are burial and Christianity bound together in our minds, that cremation, if it seem likely to supersede burial to any considerable degree, must be considered in its relations to Christianity.

That cremation is rapidly growing in public favor in this country cannot be denied. Though exactly contrary to the usages of Christendom for centuries, it already begins to dispute with burial for the possession of the discarded husk of man. Crematories have already been established in Washington, near New York, and in Buffalo; others are building in Atlanta and Detroit, while other prominent cities are agitating the question of their erection. And already the voice of the church is beginning to be distinctly heard upon the subject. Ministers and priests of all branches of the church, and all degrees of orthodoxy, are preaching sermons and writing articles upon it, not simply as men, but in their official and sacerdotal character. Among other things, therefore, the attitude of the church must be considered.

These clerical utterances have already been various. Besides the grand division into those who are *for* and *against* cremation, each class is subdivided. Some favor or oppose cremation for one reason and some for another. A prominent Presbyterian minister *

* Rev. Herbert G. Lord, Buffalo, N. Y.

recently preached upon the topic, urging cremation as advisable purely upon the sanitary ground, holding that sentiment or traditional usage should not be allowed to jeopardize the welfare of the living ; and asserting that there is nothing in the teachings of the Christian faith opposed to cremation.

Another minister* of the same denomination, in the same city, widely known throughout the country, lately advocated cremation, opposing what he regarded as the sentimental view of burial, saying that "the goal toward which, and unto which, in unflinching progress moves the lifeless human body, through earth or fire or water, is one and the same, the only difference being the degree of speed in which it hasteth along the path of decay." He argued that whereas burial made this progress a slow one, and needlessly prolonged, fire dispenses altogether with corruption, and within one brief hour performs the work of months and even years.

A bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church,† eminent alike for his piety, his research, and his poetry, some of his hymns being among the sweetest used by the Christian church to-day, recently preached a notable sermon strongly opposing cremation, on the ground that it is contrary to Christian usage ever since the dead Christ was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea ; that before the time of Christ burial was the custom of the Israelites, the chosen and peculiar people of God ; while all pagan usage was that of incineration. He spoke of the horror of committing the dear, dead form to the cruel flames, and receiving back but a handful of ashes after all was over, as being too great to be overcome, and asserted that the interment of the dead is the only mode sanctioned by Christianity.‡

* Rev. Samuel S. Mitchell, D.D., Buffalo, N. Y.

† Rt. Rev. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Western New York.

‡ Since this article was written Bishop Coxe has printed his views upon cremation. They differ but little from his spoken words on the subject ; there is less of argument as to the example of Christianity, and more of the horrors of incineration. The bishop admits, what he says he has never denied, that if cremation is absolutely necessary for the safety of mankind, it is the Christian's duty to make the sacrifice. He says that dogma has nothing to say about it, but that "religion has much to do with it; for religion means the *cultus*, the educating rights of Christianity." Then he asserts that while "a clergyman would sully his surplice who should consent to officiate in Pluto's fane at the actual burning, he need not scruple to use the service at a decent grave over the

A Roman Catholic newspaper * the organ of the bishop † of one of the most important dioceses in the country, lately republished, with distinct approval, an article from another Catholic organ ‡ declaring that the ban of the church is on the practice of cremation.

Besides these utterances § there have been many others from clergymen of high standing in their particular denominations, and out of them, exhibiting every possible shade of opinion, *pro* and *con*. The four mentioned have simply been cited as types of three great general divisions of the church, the Roman, the Anglican, and the Dissenting. || As the question of burning the dead interests the whole human family, irrespective of creed, as well as the entire Church of Christ, irrespective of sect, the purpose of this article is to consider, from a purely secular standpoint, the general relations between cremation and Christianity, as indicated by the four clerical utterances above noted. It is in nowise the intention of the writer to argue either for or against cremation as a thing to be desired or abhorred; but simply to confine the discussion to the one point indicated by the title.

The minister who advocated burning, upon a sanitary basis, did well, perhaps. The bodily health of mankind is certainly a fit relies." But here the bishop goes too far. The burning of the body is no more a "rite" than the crematory is a "fane." It is not a sacrifice to Pluto any more than it is to God. At the grave the body has begun to disintegrate—sometimes with frightful speed; but no surplice is sullied *there* according to the bishop. Why, then, are the priestly vestments smirched if the disintegration be a little more rapid? Where draw the line, if we make it a question of speed? How rapidly may the dead body return to its elements, before a priest must decline to stand beside it and speak the noble words of the service?

If the bishop grants *here* that the church teaches nothing, either written or oral, conflicting with cremation, it is strange that in his sermon he endeavored to show that, teaching by *example*—both of the church and its founder—Christianity demands that its followers bury their dead, lest they be chargeable with gross paganism.

* "The Catholic Union and Times," Buffalo, N. Y. Rev. Patrick Cronin, editor.

† Rt. Rev. Stephen V. Ryan, D.D., Bishop of Buffalo.

‡ "Catholic Review."

§ The opinions thus quoted are taken from responsible and uncontradicted reports, excepting that of Bishop Coxe, which was gathered from listening to the sermon.

|| The latter two titles are simply used for want of better and equally brief ones, to indicate the grand divisions in America outside the Roman Catholic Church.

topic for clergymen, both in and out of the pulpit. Thus they may speak of methods of drainage, or fight the yellow fever, with equal propriety, in the pulpit, upon the platform, or through the press. Christianity should always be heard clearly uttering its beliefs as to the physical welfare of man. But it is *only* as a sanitary measure that such ministers as this one can advocate cremation; for he distinctly says that he finds nothing in Christianity either for or against burning the bodies of the dead. This view, then, shows no very close or peculiar relation between cremation and Christianity. The reason given is purely secular.

The second view, indicated by the brief quotation given above, is based upon the chemical fact that cremation speedily accomplishes exactly what burial takes considerable time to bring about, namely, the complete restoration of the body to its many differing elements. But with this, too, Christianity has no especial relations. It is also a secular reason, and need not be further pursued here.

The deliverances of the Roman Catholic Church upon the subject are dogmatic, and based upon the assumption or belief that it cannot err, and must be obeyed whether reasons are given or not. Hence they are neither intended for, nor are capable of discussion.

The discourse of the Protestant Episcopal bishop perhaps represents the feelings of as many members of the Christian church as either of the others, and probably really more than any one of them. The discourse was far more of an appeal than an argument. The bishop begged the American people, in their tendency toward utilitarianism and iconoclasm, not to overturn the usages of centuries; he implored the Christian church not to abandon the burial first sanctified by the body of Jesus; he besought mankind to think of the lovely church-yards, like that which inspired Gray's "Elegy," the sweet resting-places of them that sleep, green with tender grass, beautiful with flowers, shaded by overarching trees, hallowed by the poetry of world and church alike; he cried out against the abandonment of the burial doubly hallowed by the usages of God's two great dispensations, the Mosaic and the Christian. But while the speaker doubtless touched many hearts and minds by the beauty of his oratory, the poetry of his thoughts and his heartfelt sincerity, yet he did not argue, so much as he implored. Still some of his assertions and deductions merit careful attention.

In the first place, the bishop quoted no official utterance of the

church upon the subject of burial. He cited the burial of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives, so tenderly and graphically told in the Old Testament ; and the sacred story of the burial of Jesus, in the New. But in not a single particular did he show anything but what arises from habit or custom. Men gradually come to regard as sacred the usages of centuries, and where these customs are interwoven with the ritual of a church the sacredness is enhanced a hundred-fold. Yet a time-hallowed custom may have really nothing at all to do with Christianity as such.

It is one glory of the Christian religion, and not its least, that it adapts itself so perfectly to the circumstances of every branch of the human family. Laplander and Bushman, Turk and Mongol, may drink of the Fountain of Life ; yet each may still largely follow the secular customs of his fathers. None would abandon his habits of sepulture, except in so far as they embodied the worship of strange gods, and none would need to. But the bishop is incorrect in claiming burial exclusively for the children of God. Great burial-grounds of ancient times exist upon the island of Capri. In the mouths of some of the skeletons exhumed there are found coins of Tiberius Cæsar, placed there, according to pagan custom, to pay the dead man's passage across the Styx ; Charon being evidently well informed upon the coinage of this world in all its ages. The more ancient Romans buried their dead. So did certain of the Greeks. And centuries before Jacob and his family followed their illustrious scion into Egypt, the embalmed remains of the Pharaohs and their subjects were laid to rest in tombs that still stand, mute testimony to the fact that *burial was a heathen custom*. The ancient Peruvians buried their dead. So did many of the North American savages. Others of these last elevated the bodies upon scaffolds, to secure them from beasts of prey. In all of these cases of heathen burial the custom arose from a belief in a resurrection. Would the good bishop admit that this preservation of the body is *necessary* to resurrection ? It is not possible. The question of the resurrection cannot enter into this one ; for Christianity, unlike any of the heathen religions, teaches that if the *soul* is again to tenant the body, the body will rise again, no matter what its condition, when the last trump shall sound. The martyrs cremated at the stake ; Christians cremated in buildings, on shore, and in ships at sea, their ashes dissolved in the ocean or scattered to the four winds of heaven—

shall these not rise as surely as the quiet sleepers in the churchyard? Man's tomb is the grave; God's is the universe. Man buries the dead body; while God restores it to its original elements, and disperses them among the myriad atoms. He is keeping for the last great day. Not one of them is lost by God in his boundless universe; not one of them is saved by man in the narrow grave. Neither in grave nor urn is preserved the seed that shall rise again to bloom forever.

Again, the venerable prelate was mistaken when he attributed to burning, horrors which burial does not possess. In fact, the reverse is true. Centuries have failed to accustom mankind to the results of burial. The grave is still thought of as the place of corruption. The silent horrors enacted there cannot be excluded from the mind. Even Christian people vainly resort to every device that science and art combined can offer, to prevent, or to keep from sight, the inevitable hideousness of the grave. Some embalm the bodies of their dear ones. Yet the bishop objects not to this, though it is pagan through and through. Even Christ was embalmed: why not *exact* embalming of His followers? It was just as much a part of the first Christian burial as the depositing of the sacred body in Joseph's tomb.

As for the relative horrors of burning and burial, as the reverend speaker saw fit to compare them in the pulpit, it may be permitted in this article by a layman to compare them here. Is fire worse than the worm? Are speedy ashes more awful than the slow corruption of the dear body, when the loved form is carried to its burial, the earth cast up to make the grave, and the very sides of the grave within are covered with boughs of evergreen, to shut out as much as may be the repellent sight? No sound known to incineration can so rudely wound the heart and lacerate the sensibilities as the harsh rattle of the earth upon the coffin; while the struggle and tugging of the bearers as they lower their precious burden into the grave, and the grating withdrawal of the straps cannot be paralleled in the entire process of cremation. The labors of artists and artisans—sculptors, landscape-gardeners, florists—are enlisted in the hopeless endeavor to keep the mind upon the surface, nor let it stray beneath the thin covering of green, to shrink in horror at what it knows too well lies festering there. And where one cemetery is thus beautified a hundred bleak, desolate burial-places stand in waste, weedy, heart-rending barren-

ness, mutely appealing, but in vain, for some other covering than the brambles, weeds, and nettles that flourish so fatly upon what lies below. Cremation shows no such horrors as these.

This is not a question for the church to settle. It is not one that the church *can* settle. The final words of spiritual admonition and comfort may be spoken as well above a body in the chapel of a crematory, as over one lying at the leeward gangway of a ship at sea, or upon a bier beside a grave. It is not a question of moral right or wrong, and it will be a mistake if the church attempts to make it so, even in appearance. It is simply a matter of the human will. If mankind will have burial, they will have it ; if cremation, then cremation it must be. Human will, about a thing of this kind, means public opinion. So long as the many demand burial, the majority of mankind will not be cremated ; but when the world at large desires cremation, burial may become a thing of the past. Probably never will either method be the universal one. In some places mankind will bury, and in others will burn the dead, till the end of time. Yet this need not affect the growth of Christianity one way or the other. The future of the soul can never depend upon the future of the body ; and it is the soul that Christianity would save.

ALLEN GILMAN BIGELOW.